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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars should be skilled in the use of focus groups in communication research and in interpreting the data this approach generates. The focus group is a discussion group that concentrates on a particular topic or topics and typically consists of eight to 12 participants. The group is facilitated by a moderator who follows a relatively unstructured interview guide and plays a key role in the success of the group. Focus groups can provide: (1) data which is not obtainable through paper and pencil self-report measures or observational measures; and (2) the opportunity to obtain data which is not necessarily germane to any particular group or setting. This provides qualitative information to expose underlying attitudes, opinions, and behavior patterns. The advantages of focus groups are the release of inhibition by the participants, the generation of a wide range of responses, and the creation of a valuable source of exploratory information when little is known beforehand about the researcher's topic of interest. The disadvantages are the interviewee's responses toward the interview situation itself, the concept of social desirability, and biased results. In three specific applications of focus group methodology (two doctoral dissertations and an organizational communication consulting project) and much other communication research, the focus group appears to be the "best," if not the only way, of obtaining the data to achieve the research objective. (Eighteen references are appended.) (MS)

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FOCUS GROUPS: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF GATHERING QUALITATIVE DATA IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This essay outlines focus groups as a relatively new method of research for the communication scientist. The needs for this type of research are discussed as well as essential ingredients of a quality focus group session. The advantages and disadvantages, suggested methods for analyzing focus group data and specific instances of the application of focus groups in recent communication research are also discussed.

FOCUS GROUPS: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF GATHERING QUALITATIVE DATA IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Focus groups have been heavily employed in marketing research for several years as a method of gathering qualitative data. Articles elaborating descriptions, advantages and disadvantages can be found in a variety of marketing journals such as Marketing News, Marketing Times, Journal of Advertising Research, and Advances in Consumer Research. Fewer, however, can be found in social science journals.

Clearly, the focus group is no longer the exclusive property of consumer researchers wishing to test new products or gain response to advertising campaigns. It has become an increasingly widely used method of academic social science research. Nonetheless, a growing number of non-marketing research efforts have employed focus group methodology. In a 1987 unpublished paper, Zeller has identified some doctoral dissertations and articles using focus group methodology in a variety of disciplines, including health administration, family planning, family relations, transportation and others.

This article will make the case for the focus group in communication research--suggesting appropriate inquires for its use and arguing that communication scholars in particular should be skilled at its use and in interpreting the data it generated. It will also provide a brief description of the focus group procedure and moderator qualities, a theoretical framework for their use, some suggested means of analyzing focus group data, and examples of the their utilization in recent communication studies.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A FOCUS GROUP?

Descriptions of focus groups can be found throughout the literature (e.g.: Calder, 1977; Lydecker, 1986; Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1956; Yuhas, 1986; and Zeller, 1986) The focus group is a discussion group that concentrates on a particular topic or topics and typically consists of eight to twelve participants. Focus groups can be formed on the basis of different criteria to facilitate the in-depth exploration of views of people with varying characteristics. At the same time, the free flow of information is facilitated when each group is fairly homogeneous (Pramualratan, Havanon and Knodel, 1985; Zeller, 1986).

The group is facilitated by a moderator who follows a relatively unstructured interview guide. The moderator seeks to obtain significant experiences from the interviewees germane to the topic or topics of interest. The moderator also seeks to obtain a maximum of self-revelatory information of how the topic under review has been experienced. The topic under review may be a product or service, a message about a product or service, a concept, or an institution.

The moderator plays a key role in the success of any focus group. Goldman (1962) suggests that the most important factor in producing usable information from a session is the relationship between the moderator and the participants. Rapport must be established early in the session and the moderator's language must not be too discrepant from that of the majority of the participants. One of the most important functions the moderator serves is to keep the discussion within relevant limits but not rule out that which is apparently unrelated yet which may

reveal unconscious motives.

The moderator must seek to expose interviewees' "personal contexts" and "depth responses" (Merton et al., 1956, p. 115). Personal contexts are of two types: (1) idiosyncratic contexts or highly personal experiences and attitudes in relation to the topic or topics under discussion, and (2) role contexts which are common experiences among persons of similar social status. Depth responses are the interviewees' affective experiences of the topic or topics under discussion. As Merton et al. (1956) stated, "it is a central task of the focused interviewer to learn how the prior experiences and dispositions of the interviewees are related to their structuring of the stimulus situations" (p. 117).

There are several methods available to the interviewer for exposing responses and contexts (Merton et al., 1956). Interviewers may utilize the following methods: (1) identification, by which interviewees identify themselves with the others in the group based on their present situation; (2) parallelling of experiences, by which the interviewees clarify their responses in relation to comparable life history experiences; and (3) controlled projection, in which the discussion is moved from the third person to a more personal level, from a " he did it" to an "I did it" level.

Goldman (1962) also suggests methods of attaining information. One is asking questions which ask participants to "project." An example would be to identify a particular type of behavior and ask "What kind of a person would do this?". Another involves using case methods to explore personal habits such as describing qualities of a person and asking the respondents what other qualities this person may possess. A third

method amenable to focus groups, according to Goldman, is deception. The moderator states something false and probes the reactions of the participants. The comeptent moderator is adept at using such methods singly or in combination to probe respondents and gain information relevant to research objectives.

THE NEED FOR FOCUS GROUPS

A common criticism of much communication research is that it has gotten too far away from the process of communication. Researchers are urged to provide more solid "grounded theory." Typically this is systematically generated from qualitative research, from which may be generated germane hypotheses. Focus groups have the potential of being an excellent source of qualitative data (Zeller, 1986), and a "superb mechanism for generating hypotheses when little is known" (Wells, 1974, p. 133). They are also well suited for providing a basis for the development of additional research (Cox, 1976, p. 77).

It is often said that if you give a small child a hammer, suddenly everything needs to be nailed. So has the "law of the hammer" operated in social science research. One relies on one's well used or favorite hammers (individual interviews, or survey instruments, or chi squares, or ANOVA etc.) to generate reliable knowledge. There is always the risk of becoming overly zealous with one's favorite research method. The risk is that only certain kinds of inquires will be raised and answered. Focus groups, as a method of gathering qualitative data, may provide a new opportunity for communication researchers who are tired of the well used hammers and provide the scientific community with a means

of gathering information otherwise not obtainable.

Zeller (1986) states that "when the goals of the research are general, call for qualitative data, require data that is not in the respondent's top-of-mind, and when there is minimal prior knowledge about a particular problem and the range of responses likely to emerge, the focus group may be the appropriate research design" (p. 1). Focus groups have the ability to provide us with data which is not obtainable through paper and pencil self-report measures or observational measures. In areas of study in which little is known, focus groups may be an appropriate place to begin--a new and appropriate hammer.

Focus groups provide the opportunity to obtain data which is not necessarily germane to any particular group or setting (Morgan and Spanish, 1984, p. 258). The focus group "has the potential of providing a methodology of exploration which allows participants to express their concerns within a context that is useful to the scientific community" (Zeller, 1986, p. 3).

This provides qualitative information to expose underlying attitudes, opinions, and behavior patterns (Pramualratan et al., 1985). Ideally, the focus group closes the gap between the interviewee's initial perceptions of a topic and their final reports of what they have seen (Merton et al., 1956).

ESTABLISHING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Establishing a theoretical framework is necessary in order to support the usefulness of any data-gathering technique. The concepts of scientific versus everyday knowledge, objectivity, generalizability,

reliability, and validity should be addressed.

Focus groups have been described as "soft" and "sexy" research with little validity compared to quantitative studies. Now, according to Lydecker (1986), focus groups "boast their own label - qualitative research - and are widely respected for bringing out information that might be missed by a statistical study" (p. 74). Calder (1977) has provided perhaps one of the most comprehensive reviews of this aspect of focus groups and differentiates between the desire for scientific and everyday knowledge. Discussing the philosophy of science he states that:

> The world of everyday thought is separate from scientific discourse. It is composed of the terms and ordinary language that people use to give meaning to the world in their everyday lives. As such, its function is analogous to that of science. It allows one to interpret the real world by use of simplified ideas. The only difference is that scientific constructs are supposed to be more powerful and to be subject to more rigorous and critical verification than are everyday ideas. (p. 354)

Calder is stating that scientific constructs upon which most current research is based are abstracted forms and represent only limited aspects of real-world objects and behaviors. In quantitative research scientific knowledge seeks to use numbers to test scientific constructs and causal hypotheses, whereas the the desire for everyday knowledge seeks to describe the numerical patterns. Calder sees the distinction between scientific and everyday knowledge in qualitative research as ambiguous.

According to Zeller's interpretation (1986) the ambiguity of the distinction is based on the confusion between first degree and second degree constructs. The former are "low abstraction" constructs which construct reality form the actor's perspective, and the latter which construct reality from the scientist's perspective.

Calder distinquishes between exploratory, clinical, and phenomenological approaches to focus group research. He claims that the exploratory approach to qualitative research seeks prescientific knowledge. This knowledge is not meant to have scientific status, it is meant to be its precursor. He states that when focus groups are conducted in anticipation of prompting quantitative scientific knowledge, their purpose is to stimulate the thinking of the researchers. They are using everyday thoughts and words to operationalize second-degree constructs and hypotheses. When focus groups are conducted in anticipation of gaining qualitative exploratory knowledge they are facilitating the construct-generation process. Calder states that the aim of exploratory research might well be described as grounded theory. Calder suggests that the exploratory approach be used "when scientific explanation is desired but researchers are uncertain about second-degree constructs, or when a scientific explanation is at hand and researchers want to compare it with ...[lay persons'] interpretations" (1977, p. 361).

The clinical, or therapeutic approach, for Calder, cannot be correctly studied through quantitative means. He suggests that this approach be used when researchers need to invoke scientific constructs which are not amenable to self-report or direct inference. He states

group participants. Calder suggests that generalizations can be assessed through subsequent research designed to test the clinical interpretation with a quantitative technique.

Generalizability for the phenomenological approach, according to Calder, is more easily assessed through follow-up quantitative research. Calder warns, however, that "the phenomenological approach is predicated on experiencing the experience of [others]. This is best done through personal contact. Quantitative surveys, though they permit estimates of generality, are a poor substitute for even vicarious experience" (1977, p. 361) and continues to suggest that additional focus groups may be a better way to establish generalizability. A rule of thumb is to conduct focus groups until the researchers can be reasonably sure that the same information will be repeated. This typically occurs after the fourth or fifth session.

Goldman (1962) suggests requirements of good group interviews such as objectivity, reliability, and validity. He suggests that to promote objectivity, or "avoidance of the bias of the interviewer and client [or research team]"(p. 66), the moderator should refrain from contributing to the discussion as much as possible and monitor his/her actions carefully. He also suggests that the identity of the client or research team be disguised. As the goal of focus group research is to ask "why" rather than "how many," to generate hypotheses rather than assert their representativeness, the question of reliability becomes unimportant.

Goldman states that "a source of continual concern to the researcher is the *validity* problem (italics his)" (p. 67). Focus groups

tend to suffer from inhibiting factors just as do other methods of qualitative research. Goldman, through his experiences with focus groups, concludes that discrepancies between attitude expression and actual behavior are decreased, implying reasonable validity of the method.

ADVANTAGES OF THE FOCUS GROUP

As does any method of research, the focus group has its advantages and its disadvantages. One advantage is the release of inhibition by the participants; the standards created by group interaction based on interviewer's guidance calls for full and open expression of intimate experiences and sentiments similar to those of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

A second advantage of focus group data is that it usually contains a wide range of responses. The range of responses are particularly useful in exploratory research. The focus group may stimulate recall and activate important and forgotten personal details about the topic or topics of interest within the interviewees. Thus, focus groups allow respondents to expand on their views and "capitalize on the value of group dynamics, encouraging participants to react to and build on one another's ideas" (Lydecker, 1986, p. 74). Allport (1965) stated simply that if we want to know how people felt, what they experienced, what they remembered, what their emotions and motives were like and the reasons for acting as they did--why not just ask them?

A third advantage of the focus group method which had already been discussed is that of being a valuable source of exploratory

information when little is known beforehand about the researcher's topic of interest. It can provide a point from which to begin formulating hypotheses and research questions for subsequent quantification and/or exploration.

DISADVANTAGES OF THE FOCUS GROUP

One disadvantage of the focus group is that of interviewee's responses toward the interview situation itself (Merton et al., 1956). Controversies may emerge; and the more outspoken members of the group may try to lead the group while those less articulate and less outspoken follow. This is generally prompted more by the interplay of personalities than by the topic or topics under discussion. Also, respondents may introduce matters totally irrelevant to the topic of interest (Merton et al., 1956). It is the moderator's duty to control these types of patterns within the group.

A second disadvantage which haunts quantitative methods as well as qualitative methods of research is the concept of social desirability. Crowne and Marlow (1964) suggest that self-report test scores are influenced by non-test relevant response determinants. They suggest that participants sometimes report what they believe are socially acceptable, or socially desirable answers. Although Crowne and Marlow's research deals with self-report statistical studies, the concept of social desirability may also be applied to focus group responses. Participants in the focus group may provide answers which they believe are socially acceptable so as not to appear abnormal or deviant from the other group members.

Focus groups may also be very costly. Professional moderator's fees may run anywhere from $100.00 to $300.00 per session, light refreshments should be served at each session, and participants are compensated for their time by money or gifts. Therefore, a series of four focus group sessions may easily cost $2,500.00 or more.

A final disadvantage of the focus group method is that of biased results. It is possible that those people who are extroverted and outgoing are more likely to participate in focus group sessions than those who are communication apprehensives. It is possible then that participants represent only a particular segment of society which diminishes the generalizability of the results despite the randomness of the sample. As suggested earlier, generalizability may or may not be of concern depending on the type of information sought. It is something, however, which the researcher should keep in mind when examining the results and applying them to the larger population.

SUGGESTED ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

There are a variety of methods one may employ for analyzing focus group data. One procedure described by Berelson (1956) deals specifically with qualitative research and may be particularly useful for analyzing focus group data. This procedure, according to Berelson, is termed "pre-quantitative," or "qualitative" content analysis. He stated that this is a process for "discovering and/or formulating appropriate categories for subsequent quantification... [It] is the process of inducting hypotheses which yield generalized categories for systematic analysis" (p. 115). It looks for the frequency of certain types of statements and

the incidence of "general categories."

Berelson (1956) stated that qualitative content analysis is "quasi-quantitative." He stated that this qualitative analysis contains quantitative statements in "rough form." "Instead of saying, for example, that 73% of the content fits a given category, they say that the category is 'strongly emphasized' or that the content 'tends in this direction'" (p. 118). He suggests that content analysis may be useful 1) to describe the characteristics of the content itself; 2) to make valid inferences from the nature of the content to characteristics of the producers of the content; and 3) to interpret the content so as to reveal something about the nature of its audience or its effects.

A qualitative content analysis approach may be particularly useful when one's research is exploratory. Berelson states that when sample size is small and extreme precision is not essential, this type of analysis is most beneficial.

In those instances where extreme precision is essential, when specific categories must be examined, and the research is not necessarily exploratory, a quantitative content analysis may be in order.

Whichever type of analysis is employed, it is suggested that the focus group data and resulting categories be submitted to another researcher for validation (Kassarjian, 1977).

APPLICATIONS OF THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

This section will describe three specific applications of focus group methodology in recent communication research efforts. Two are doctoral dissertations; one is an organizational communication

consulting project.

In the first application, Yuhas (1986) was interested in romantic marital jealousy and discovered the lack of any appropriate measures of romantic jealousy in marriage. As a consequence, she arranged for four focus groups of 38 respondents divided according to sex and length of marriage. Issues probed in the groups included participant conceptualization of jealousy, how it was customarily communicated about, the causes of jealousy, and the constructive and destructive methods marital partners use in dealing with marital jealousy. Several categories for further exploration emerged within the discussions such as the relationship between marital jealousy and masculinity; the conceptual confusion among marital jealousy, envy and anger; the relationship between the length of marriage and occurrence of romantic jealousy; the point at which a rival becomes a threat; and preventive measures spouses engage in to thwart it. The discussions were submitted to a qualitative content analysis and the emergent themes were incorporated into an initial scale for future verification.

In the second instance, Lehman (1987) attempted an evaluation of the various anti-smoking campaigns of the prior generation, asking specifically the questions "how do people process and respond to anti-smoking messages?". He conducted groups of confirmed smokers, ex-smokers, non-smokers, and non-smoking family members of smokers. He was also interested in insight as to whether the dissonance, social judgment, or cognitive processing models offered better explanations of resistance to persuasion phenomena in the specific smoking case. Lehman concluded that the latter model "fit" his findings and detailed

some intriguing conclusions regarding fear appeals and physician credibility.

Finally, an on-going organizational intervention by the junior author involves use of focus groups as a way of both identifying those core values that comprise the "corporate culture" and those structural barriers that exist which impede their acceptance at all levels of the organization. Additionally, focus groups are being used in this project to determine for each major division critical components of its intra organizational image.

Two points will summarize our position. First, in these projects (and many worthwhile similar ones) the focus group appears to be the "best," if not the only way of obtaining the data to achieve the research objective. In none of the three cases were the findings regarded as definitive, only provocative and suggestive of further research inquiry (of course, this observation fits most research endeavors).

Second, the kinds of skills required by the moderator are the kinds of skills taught in communication classes in colleges and universities across the nation. The communication scholar should not only welcome the opportunity for additional research methods, he or she should be especially well equipped to moderate and or evaluate the focus group.

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